DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 479 532 CS 512 340

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TITLE	Considering the Context for Intervention: One Urban Effort.
INSTITUTION	Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, Ann Arbor, MI.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2001-06-00
NOTE	8p.
CONTRACT	R305R70004
AVAILABLE FROM	CIERA/University of Michigan, 610 E. University Ave., 1600 SEB, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259. Tel: 734-647-6940; Fax: 734-763-1229. For full text: http://www.ciera.org/library/archive/ 2001-03/200103mh.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Education; Emergent Literacy; Grade 1; *Intervention; Program Descriptions; *Reading Instruction; *School Community Programs; *Tutoring; Urban Education; *Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS	*America Reads Challenge; New York (South Bronx); Retired Persons; Retired Senior Volunteer Program

ABSTRACT

Over 1,000 colleges and universities have joined the America Reads initiative and have placed Federal Work-Study students in high-needs schools, the majority in urban settings. Few outside the reading field recognize the complexities associated with instruction for emergent readers, particularly for students who arrive at school with few literacy skills. Among other things, tutors must understand the importance of alphabet knowledge, letter-sound correspondences, and the development of a concept of word. Indeed, the training and continual supervision of tutors is one factor that must be considered in a successful intervention effort. Book Buddies is a community volunteer one-on-one tutoring program that uses a triad of individuals to work toward a child's reading success. The triad consists of the child, the volunteer tutor, and the reading coordinator. Tutors follow a structured sequence of activities using the Book Buddies 4-part lesson plan that consists of the following basic elements: (1) rereading familiar story books; (2) word study; (3) writing; and (4) reading a new book. This paper describes a Book Buddies program in an elementary school in the South Bronx, NY (the poorest Congressional District in the nation), in which members from the Retired Senior Volunteer Project were recruited and trained to tutor first-grade children. The paper concludes that Book Buddies in the Bronx was an intervention project in which the children who received 40 Book Buddies lessons statistically significantly surpassed the students in the control group on measures of accurate word reading in context, letter identification, and word reading in isolation. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

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Considering the Context for Intervention: One Urban Effort[1]

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ED 479 532

The challenges facing public schools in urban settings are not new. The persistent low achievement of students in these settings has contributed to the development of national legislation designed to support schools and families in teaching all children to read. The America Reads Challenge Act of 1997 is a response to the literacy obstacles (e.g., overcrowded classrooms, increasing academic diversity among students, and teacher shortages) faced by our schools. President Clinton invited all Americans to join in the effort to improve children's reading achievement, and stressed the importance of communities coming together to ensure all children read well. America Reads legislation proposed the creation of volunteer reading programs that use highly-trained volunteers, work in high-need areas, support in-school efforts, and involve a home component (Wasik, 1998).

Many of the volunteer programs created through America Reads involve collaborative efforts between universities and public schools. Over 1,000 colleges and universities have joined the America Reads Initiative and have placed Federal Work-Study students in high-needs schools. Other America Reads projects recruit and train national service program volunteers from programs such as AmeriCorps, VISTA, and Foster Grandparents to work as volunteers. The majority of the America Reads projects take place in urban settings, environments that are often beset with complex combinations of economic and social stresses. Given these complex environments, it is critical that individuals who work in these settings have a keen understanding of the factors involved for successful intervention implementation.

Undoubtedly, these America Reads volunteer intervention efforts provide at-risk students with literacy opportunities that they may not otherwise experience. Wasik (1998) recognizes the potential impact these volunteers may have on the reading development of thousands of students, yet she cautions that a significant increase in the reading success of these students depends on quality training and supervision for the tutors involved in an intervention. This point is undoubtedly true. Few outside of the reading field recognize the complexities associated with instruction for emergent readers, particularly for students who arrive at school with few literacy skills. Among other things, tutors need to understand the importance of alphabet knowledge, letter-sound correspondences, and the development of a concept of word (Morris, 1981). Indeed, the training and continual supervision of tutors comprise one factor that must be considered in a successful intervention effort. Other factors that must be considered are the numerous economic and social influences present in the school.

Book Buddies

Book Buddies, described at length elsewhere (see Invernizzi, Juel, & Rosemary, 1997) is a community volunteer one-on-one tutoring program that uses a triad of individuals to work toward a child's reading success. The program began as a small part of one school district's efforts to ensure that all children learned to read independently and well by third grade. The Book Buddies triad consists of the child, the volunteer tutor, and the reading coordinator. The volunteer tutor works one-on-one with a student on reading, writing, and phonics. Tutors follow a structured sequence of activities using the Book Buddies four-part lesson plan (Johnston, Invernizzi, & Juel, 1998) that consists of the following basic elements: (a) rereading familiar story books, (b) word study, (c) writing, and (d) reading a new

CS 512 340

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book. Children in the Book Buddies program typically receive 1 1/2 hours of tutoring per week.
A critical component of Book Buddies is that each lesson is written and supervised by a reading specialist. The reading specialist assesses a child's performance, determines appropriate skills the child needs to develop, and plans lessons written at the child's instructional level. In addition, the reading specialist is able to provide ongoing feedback to the tutors and model appropriate teaching behaviors. Tutors and students are paired at the beginning of the year and, with rare exception, continue to work together throughout the school year.

Book Buddies in the Bronx

Book Buddies in the Bronx (BBB) was a Book Buddies program set in one elementary school in the South Bronx, NY. The project served as an attempt to replicate the successes of Book Buddies (Invernizzi, Juel, Rosemary, & Richards, 1997) in an urban setting and, by doing so, create a replicable model for other urban volunteer intervention projects.
Funded by an America Reads Challenge grant and the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA), Book Buddies in the Bronx was formed by the marriage of two existing programs, Book Buddies and Community Service Society's Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). The RSVP program places senior citizens in schools in high-risk communities to volunteer, with a focus on children's literacy skills.
First-grade students from the BBB school were referred for Book Buddies tutoring based on the end of kindergarten schoolwide assessment program and teacher referral. After conducting our own assessments using PALS (Invernizzi, Meier, Swank, & Juel, 1998), 55 of the lowest-scoring first graders were selected. Students were matched by pretest summed scores, then randomly assigned to either treatment (Cohort A, n = 28) or control group (Cohort B, n = 27) conditions. Fifteen senior citizen volunteers tutored two or three first-grade students throughout the course of a single day using the Book Buddies lesson plan. Each tutor worked 15 to 20 hours a week and received a small travel stipend from the Community Service Society.
The BBB project employed a full-time reading specialist, who coordinated the triad, assessed the students, wrote the lesson plans for each lesson, and provided ongoing training and supervision. The results of our study are described elsewhere (see Meier & Invernizzi, 1999). This purpose of this paper is to describe this America Reads effort to recruit and train community members from the Retired Senior Volunteer Project (RSVP) to tutor first-grade children in the South Bronx, NY. The complexity of urban environments, as well as the intricacies of training community volunteers is discussed.
In our tutorial project, it became abundantly clear that our intervention implementation would not be successful without careful attention and sensitivity to the contextual dynamics within the community. These contextual influences included an understanding of how the school fit into the broader context of a community, the pressures that existed within the school, and an appreciation for our volunteer community members. One of the first steps in acknowledging the context for the Book Buddies project was understanding how the school fit into the milieu of the broader community.

The School in the Context of Community

The BBB school is in Congressional District 16 in the South Bronx, the poorest Congressional District in the nation. The population in this district is roughly 67% Hispanic, 31% Non-Hispanic Black, and 2% Non-Hispanic White. An estimated 18% of the population does not speak English well or at all. More than half the population is unemployed and dependent on some form of government assistance. Over 30% of adults over 24 achieved less than a 9th grade education, and over 17% of young people age 16-19, are not enrolled in school, are not high-school graduates, and are not participating in the labor force (Molina, 1997).
The conditions that typically threaten children living in marginal and extreme urban poverty are present in the BBB

community. According to school records and interviews with the principal, many children that enter this school have not had routine childhood immunizations. In addition, most newly admitted students have never been examined by a medical doctor or dentist. There is a high infant mortality rate in this district because of the amount of teenage pregnancy, reluctance of young women to pursue prenatal care, children born of drug-addicted parents, and overall poverty. Many of the children who live in this community are deprived of basic needs--proper nutrition, nurturing relationships, adequate shelter, health care, positive and consistent role models--and look to the schools for the support that is missing at home (Molina, 1997).

Kindergarten is not mandatory in New York. Therefore, some of the children involved in the BBB project were just beginning their formal education experience at six years old. According to the principal, some of these children hailed from homes where a parent was a known drug dealer in the community; others arrived at school each day from shelters. Ultimately, for many of the BBB children, literacy experiences are a low priority in day-to-day life activities. Many of the students have had no prior exposure to the alphabet or to reading-readiness activities. As a result, many of the children entered school and the Book Buddies program without a fundamental knowledge of the most basic literacy skills or even an appreciation of how they might prove useful in their lives.

In terms of implementing the Book Buddies program, recognizing the broader context of the community required that we were highly attuned to the diverse backgrounds of our students, and that we remained sensitive to the daily conditions in which these children lived. Logistically, this meant scheduling additional time for each tutoring session, because many of the children came to the Book Buddies room needing hugs, some personal attention and a snack before they were ready for tutoring. For other students, it meant scheduling extra lessons to combat a high absentee rate, often due to illness. For example, several of the BBB students missed more than 20 school days between September and December. In addition to understanding the community from which our children came, we learned that we must also be sensitive to the pressures that existed within the school.

School Pressures

After a long period of persistent low performance in its public schools, the New York State commissioner of education created a school status called "Registration Review." The registration review process is the primary method by which the New York State Board of Regents holds schools accountable for educational performance, and is intended to help school districts correct situations that impede quality education (http://www.nysed.gov/nycscs/Registration.htm). Through registration review, low-performing schools are identified, and schools and districts are assisted to devise and implement strategies designed to produce measurable improvements in the academic performance of their students. Schools in registration review were under threat of having their state registration revoked and being shut down (Lemann, 1998). The BBB school was first identified as a low-performing school in 1989, and was operating under a school improvement plan during our implementation year.

Registration review is a form of school restructuring, which can take many forms. The basic premise, however, is that schools must address the below-average school test score data and become more responsive to the needs of the students. The staff is charged with the task of creating and implementing a corrective action plan that includes methods to improve (among other things) instruction, curriculum, assessment, school management and leadership, and parent and community involvement. Because of the pressure of review status and the need to improve test scores, four issues were "front burner" issues for this principal and school: teacher staffing, resource allocation, grouping, and curriculum materials.

Teacher Staffing. Krei (1998) writes that one of the most pervasive ways in which poor children are shortchanged in our public schools is in the quality of the teaching they receive. For example, in many districts, the youngest, most inexperienced teachers are placed in the most difficult settings because those schools consistently have the highest number of openings. Other school districts have seniority policies that allow experienced teachers to move from low- to higher-status schools; these practices allow experienced teachers to transfer to less-difficult settings once they have accumulated years of service. As the more experienced teachers move, new hires are often placed into the most difficult settings.

Typical teacher turnover, reshuffling and retirement resulted in 15 new teachers, many of them young and inexperienced, teaching in the BBB school during our implementation year. Several of these teachers did not have

teacher certification, and were working on licensure through part-time night classes at a nearby college. Although under-prepared teachers are not a new phenomenon in urban schools, their continued existence largely ignores research that documents the importance of teachers in effective schooling (e.g., Brophy, 1982). The influx of so many new teachers required that the teachers at our school were working to adjust to new teammates and new group dynamics. At the first-grade level, a new, uncertified teacher directly impacted our project. Although this teacher was assigned the class of "high" students, she struggled for the entire year with the demands of her new teaching position. During our one-on-one interviews with this teacher, she expressed feeling very unsure about her level of preparation. She reported that she was extremely reluctant to reach out to her colleagues and avoided contact with the administration. In terms of our own intervention implementation, we would have liked to be more involved with the classroom teachers, but we were hesitant to ask too much of this teacher. Observations of this classroom and interviews with the teacher clearly indicated that the teacher was overwhelmed and struggling.

Resource Allocation. Schools under registration review are required to develop a plan to reach their academic goals. At the BBB school, the mission statement describes the school's desire to create a community of learners and to foster lifelong learners in a global society. Students are encouraged to become active participants in their learning, and the school seeks to develop a strong partnership between the home and the school. The steps for carrying out this plan were developed by the principal. One of the principal's decisions directly affected resource allocation in the school.

The principal reconfigured teaching assignments to put all of her "best" teachers and resources into third grade, a grade level where test scores are carefully reviewed. Second, the principal decided that a literacy program that had been in place for a number of years would be limited only to the third-grade students during this school year. The net effect of these practices was an unequal allocation of resources across grades; children not in third grade, who would clearly benefit from additional literacy programs, were not being provided with any additional services beyond their classroom instruction.

Grouping. The principal arranged each grade level using homogenous classroom grouping. Using end-of-the-year testing information from the previous spring, the principal divided the students at each grade level into a "high" performing classroom, a "middle" performing classroom, and a "low" performing classroom.

In the first-grade classrooms, the homogeneous grouping configuration translated into extremely challenging circumstances for the teacher of the lowest group. The teacher reported that the children in her classroom had very little fundamental background knowledge. At the beginning of the year, she found that in order for the children to follow along in the text books, she spent lots of classroom time discussing concepts such as "open" and "shut," "top" and "bottom," and "up" and "down." In addition, she remarked that the children in this class had extensive emotional needs. To her credit, the teacher of this group of children was very sensitive to that neediness. In fact, she admitted that she saw the children's emotional needs as a priority over their academic needs.

In terms of the BBB project, almost every child in the lowest group participated in the Book Buddies tutoring. As a result, the volunteers took a large number of children out of the classroom consistently throughout the afternoon. Although these children were greatly in need of the one-on-one academic and individual attention that the volunteers could give them, the teacher reported that the constant disruption made it difficult to maintain consistency in her own lessons. For the second semester, the tutor-training coordinator and the classroom teacher worked together and succeeded in developing a less disruptive system.

Curricular Materials. The BBB school adopted new curriculum materials for mathematics during our implementation year. The curriculum changes and pressures within the school left the teachers with a sense of instability that surfaced during interviews with the first-grade teachers.

Every year we have a different system! I would like us to find one system and stick with it. Right now I'm working with two different teachers' manuals for math, and more manuals for our reading program! I spend most of my planning time just trying to find the same information in all my manuals.

Indeed, the demands of the students and the pressures of redesign are reflected in their comments.

Some days and weeks it's like I'm swimming. I'm swimming trying to get to the surface, just to get my head above water. And just when I break through the surface, someone pours more water in.

As researchers involved in a meaningful intervention effort, we struggled to find the proper balance between wanting to invite the teachers to participate more actively in our project and understanding the level of stress they were experiencing as a result of the school's registration review status. Throughout the year, we learned that we needed to understand and respect not only the teachers in the building, but also our community volunteers.

The Community of Tutors

One unique aspect of the Book Buddies program is that community volunteers are trained to work as the reading tutors. In Charlottesville, Virginia, where Book Buddies originated, the majority of Book Buddy volunteers are individuals who work in professional occupations or have retired from the business or academic areas. Several of the Charlottesville Book Buddies tutors work for local businesses where they are provided with release time to tutor twice a week. The tutors' ages' range from 25 to 65, with a large number of tutors aged 35-45. Most of the tutors are well-educated Caucasian women who have school-aged children (M. Invernizzi, personal communication, January 4, 1999).

The 15 volunteers in the BBB project represented a far different population from the volunteers in the Book Buddies parent program. Our volunteers were senior citizens who volunteered four hours per day, four days per week. Two of the volunteers were men, and 13 were women. The education level of the tutors varied; some had as little as a seventh-grade education, and others had graduated from college. Two of the volunteers were retired certified teachers. Several of the tutors spoke English as a second language.

Our tutors attended a formal 3-day training workshop held before the beginning of school. This training included modeled portions of each component of the lesson plan, role-playing of each component, and quizzes on presented information. We provided each tutor with a Book Buddies manual (Johnston et al., 1998), and ongoing informal training throughout the year. The Tutor Training Coordinator conducted small-group training with the 15 tutors at least one hour each week. During these training sessions, she modeled appropriate strategies and provided consultation on individual cases. In addition to teaching our volunteers about emergent literacy, we also provided training in less subtle teaching behaviors, such as the pacing of a lesson, how to conduct quality post-reading discussions, and how to match an error correction response to a word recognition error.

Our senior citizen volunteers brought a lifetime of experience with them to their work. We found that their experience presented both advantages and challenges to the implementation of the program. On the positive side, the volunteers came from the same community as the children and shared a common set of cultural practices, increasing their capacity to develop strong bonds with the children they tutored.

On the challenging side, many of the volunteers came to the BBB project with preconceived ideas about how children should learn and what learning should "look like." Some of the tutors focused more on the way that the children sat in their chairs and held a pencil than on the children's reading. Whether a cultural or a generational disposition, it was clear that many of the tutors thought children should be obedient and passive participants in the lesson. Many of the tutors preferred to dictate to the children, rather than to allow them to take control of their own learning. For example, BB tutors are encouraged to allow the children to hold their own sorting cards, choose the order in which they read the books, and compose their own sentences--or fill in a blank in a sentence. However, our BBB tutors expressed concern that if they granted these allowances, the children might get "too familiar" with the tutor and take advantage of the situation.

Some tutors insisted on following their own plan and dismissed the Book Buddies lesson plan; many believed that the best method to teach reading was the one that they experienced in school. This usually meant that they presented children with lists of words to memorize and insisted upon correct spelling of words (which were often well above their students' instructional levels). All this occurred in the face of fairly elaborate training efforts on our part. This may, however, suggest that understanding reading development is difficult, that some tutors may not have a core foundation of knowledge with which to ground these concepts, and that learned practices, even those that are based upon distant recollections, die hard.

Although we encountered many hurdles in the implementation of the BBB program, we also experienced some successes. On the whole, the volunteers demonstrated improvement over time, suggesting that continual training and immediate feedback did impact most of our tutors. For example, each lesson consists of a word study component in which students sort pictures by the initial consonant sound. Initially, the tutors focused on whether students could correctly identify the picture. Observational data from the later part of the year revealed that most tutors understood the purpose of the activity and shifted their focus to letter-sound awareness.

Conclusion

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Book Buddies in the Bronx was a community volunteer intervention project in an urban setting in the South Bronx, NY. Our participation in this project taught us that both the community and school contexts dramatically influence the way an intervention can by implemented and requires program facilitators to make both minor and major adaptations in order to achieve even a modest level of success. Most salient for our project were the emotional needs of the children (spawned in our view by the prevailing culture of poverty), the incredible stresses on the teachers (prompted by an abundance of reform opportunities), and the resistance of tutors to new ways of interacting with children.

Is stress unique to this school? Undoubtedly not; every school operates under political and economic demands. However, urban settings, traditionally high on problems and low on resources, often face greater challenges than do other settings. Those interested in collaborating with such communities, through America Reads volunteer efforts, school-business partnerships, or university-school partnerships, must take an active role in understanding the context of the community.

Our experience in the Bronx was successful, enlightening and informative. From a quantitative perspective, we were pleased that the children who received 40 Book Buddies lessons statistically significantly surpassed the students in the control group on measures of accurate word reading in context, letter identification, and word reading in isolation (Meier & Invernizzi, 1999). However, other lessons taught us more about the qualitative aspects of doing intervention research in challenging settings. We learned that even with the best intentions, intervention efforts can be hindered by influences outside of our control. Community and school pressures may affect teachers' ability to become interested or involved in a project. Preconceived beliefs about teaching and learning on the part of community volunteers may affect their willingness to accept guidance about effective tutoring. Most importantly, we learned that it would have been professionally irresponsible to ignore the pressures and issues within our school setting and to proceed as if those pressures did not exist. Intervention efforts cannot operate in a vacuum; they must reflect an understanding of the dynamics of the community. With thousands of America Reads projects being set up in other urban settings, we hope that others can learn from our lesson and take seriously the task of understanding and honoring the complex communities in which they work.

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1.The work reported herein was partially supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, PR/Award number R305R70004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U. S. Department of Education. However, the contents do no necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment, or the National Institute on Early Childhood Development, or the U.S. Department of Education.

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